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TUNISIA

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Project: 7088

I. SUMMARY

In June, IRI staff met with a Tunisian political party activist in Morocco to discuss future programming. In other activities, IRI staff went to Tunis that same month to meet with MEPI officials, Tunisian government officials and with political party/civil society representatives. As a result of the visit, a Tunis based regional polling conference in September was approved and a study mission to Ukraine in the fall is being planned.

II. BACKGROUND

Since its formal independence in 1956 Tunisia has been characterized as a one party state, with the country's founding leader Habib Bourguiba acting both as father of the nation and President for life until his forced removal from office in 1987. The consolidation of power by Bourguiba's Neo-Destour Party in the years immediately following independence and its speedy transition into a national ruling party helped create a unique modern political experience in Tunisia whereby the party, now called the Constitutional Democratic Rally (RCD), held significant levels of popular support in its early years and was able to prove its capacity for effective and efficient civil administration. This phenomenon is linked in part to the enigmatic leadership of Bourguiba himself who made national development and social progressivism central features of state building efforts. The Bourguiba model resulted in a highly professionalized civil service apparatus that can be commended for its administrative skill but lacks political dynamism.

The degree to which modernity and development constitute primary themes of Tunisian nationalism also helped create an environment favorably disposed to market economic reform, modern education and progressive social attitudes toward women. Tunisia, for example, became the first Arab state to formally abolish polygamy in 1956 and women have had the right to vote and hold elected office since independence. Twenty-one

women currently hold seats in Tunisia's legislature. By 1965, Tunisia also ranked second among Arab states in the percentage of children attending school, a trend that continues to reflect positively upon Tunisia today by way of the country's high literacy rates relative to other North African states. The product of this history during the years since independence has resulted in a highly diversified economy, steady economic growth, stable population growth, and an exemplary record regarding women.

Equally significant to the country's modern history, however, is notable absence of progress with respect to democratic political participation. It was not until 1994 that Tunisia held its first multiparty elections for parliament, and competitive elections for president were held for the first time only in 1999. Tunisia has consistently ranked at the bottom of international measures regarding freedom of speech, political rights and press freedoms and according to human rights reports continues to hold prisoners of conscience to this day. While tentative openings can be traced at various points throughout Tunisia's post-independence history, mobilization by potential challengers to the RCD, first by trade and labor organizations during the 1960's and more recently by Islamist elements have curtailed any genuine commitment to democratic reform. Bourguiba's personal style of rule is again attributable to much of this phenomenon as his legacy as "Supreme Combatant" allowed few avenues for accepted dissent.

Tunisia's current President Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali, who assumed power under the pretext of political reform in 1987, has made a number of tentative reform steps since assuming power, including establishing set terms of office for the president, enacting electoral reforms which ensure 20% representation for the opposition parties in parliament, and allowing the human rights group Amnesty International to establish a regional branch in Tunis. However, Ben Ali's own record has come under fire from human rights groups and dissidents for initiatives such the RCD's altering of the constitution to allow him to run for a fourth term for President and its creation of a second house of parliament with most members appointed by the President.

Despite these challenges, Tunisia's opposition parties and emerging civil society remain committed to the process of building democracy in their country. Citizen calls for political reform are increasing along the length and breadth of the Arab world, from Egypt to Lebanon and Morocco to Iraq. IRI believes Tunisia will not be immune to such calls and further believes that Tunisia is of continued strategic importance to democratization efforts in the region.

III. PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

IRI staff met with a leader of the Tunisian Democratic and Progressive Party in Rabat, where both were present for a Moroccan political party convention, or congress. The political environment of Tunisia and political party needs in future IRI programming were discussed. In other activities, IRI staff went to Tunis in June 2005 and met with various Tunisian associations to discuss the possibility of Tunisia specific and regional programs. Staff held discussions, accompanied by U.S. Embassy and MEPI representatives, with Tunisian government officials to coordinate possible future

activities in the country and to establish a permanent presence in Tunisia. Although the Tunisian Foreign Ministry official meeting with IRI opened the meeting by saying greater coordination was needed, he was not receptive to the near-term opening of an IRI office in Tunisia, a major item on the agenda of this meeting.

The possibility of a Tunisian political party study mission to a regional or European country to look at elections, civil society and coalitions, was raised by IRI in the meeting but no definitive answer was provided. A near-term activity, in the next reporting quarter, would be a regional polling conference in late September. This conference will bring practitioners (pollsters and public opinion researchers) as well as consumers of such information (political leaders, candidates and elected officials) to Tunis for a three day gathering.

Future activities would likely include a study mission for Tunisian political party representatives and an event which would include women from the Doha, Qatar Campaign School held in February 2004. This latter event would seek to expose select participants from the Doha School to civil society associations in Tunisia that either are women's organizations or associations where women are in leadership or decision-making roles.

IV. RESULTS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Objective One: Numbers and skills of reform minded candidates for elected political office will increase through regional campaign schools

No activities to report for this quarter

Objective Two: Multiparty Political Systems will become More Representative and Competitive

Result #1: To reform established political parties and to strengthen nascent democratic political parties to make them more democratic, transparent, representative and effective.

Indicator #1: Parties will be exposed to new strategies related to candidate recruitment, the selection of party office holders and internal and external communications.

No activities to report for this quarter

Indicator #2: Parties will be exposed to new techniques for developing improved organizational structures at the regional and commune levels to increase their national presence.

No activities to report for this quarter

Result #2: To expand democratic political participation and encourage more competitive multiparty systems.

Indicator # 1: Cooperative efforts between Tunisian civil society associations and NGOs will be used to launch a cross-sector voter/civic education program.

No activities to report for this quarter

Indicator #2: Increased numbers of women, youth and rural voters will understand the importance of participation at the ballot box

No activities to report for this quarter

Result #3: To increase the skills candidates and elected officials in national and local level bodies through training.

Indicator #3: Elected officials will improve skills related to legislative agenda development, legislative policy analysis and constituent services.

No activities to report for this quarter

Indicator #3: Elected officials will develop improved coalition building and negotiation skills

No activities to report for this quarter

V. EVALUATION

No activities to report for this quarter

VI. FUTURE ACTIVITIES

Please refer to Activities Section.